

Six Degrees of Opportunity: Connecting Knowledge in All Directions

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How often have you heard someone say, “It’s a small world, isn’t it?” Unless the person just happens to be exiting the popular “It’s A Small World” attraction at Disneyland or Disney World, the reference is usually to how interconnected we all seem to be, prompted by running into a surprising connection to someone you’ve just met.

We shouldn’t be too surprised when such coincidences occur. In fact, experiments have shown that on average it takes only six or seven contacts among friends for a message to go from any one person to any other person in the world.

What does that mean? Here’s an example: If you wanted to meet a famous person, you could start by asking all of your friends if they knew the famous person. Chances are that none of your friends would. You could also ask your friends who don’t know the person to ask their friends if they do, and so forth. By the sixth or seventh time such a message had been passed on to friends unknown to you, your message would typically reach the famous person through a friend of theirs.

This concept was popularized by these lines written by John Guare in his play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, originally staged in 1990: “I am bound to everyone on this planet by a trail of six people.”

The play was later turned into a better-known movie that portrayed how a real-life con man pretended to be the son of actor Sidney Poitier and invoked a “friendship” with a couple’s children, children he has never met but had heard about, to gain a place to stay while recuperating from a stab wound.

Most people think for a moment about that concept of connectedness, shake their heads, and start focusing on something else. Dr. Andreas Stark, however, made an amazing discovery when he began exploring his business choices from this perspective.

Dr. Stark is a well-qualified geophysicist who can do two highly valuable activities very well: Find oil and gas using seismic information (sending

waves of energy through the Earth and reading the reflections) and teach other people how to do the same. For many years, he prospered by providing consulting services to petroleum companies looking for hydrocarbons and teaching classes on how to apply scientific principles more accurately to uncover valuable oil and gas deposits.

Why is using seismic information scientifically important? Well, when you get back seismic information reflecting what's present under the Earth's surface, it appears to show you a picture of where oil and gas might be found. However, because of the ways energy is reflected, the pictures you are looking at appear to show oil and gas deposits where none exist. It takes a real expert to take the seismic information and interpret it to get a true picture of what's going on as much as several miles underground (especially when that area is also located in deep water, which further complicates interpretation).

Dr. Stark wanted to accomplish more than his enviable success: He wanted to turn his course materials into books, offer e-learning materials to millions, and increase his income at a time when his clients were becoming less and less interested in using geophysical consultants for these interpretive tasks.

How can a busy consultant and trainer hope to accomplish all that? Naturally, he felt it would take an enormous amount of work . . . potentially thousands of hours.

Dr. Stark realized that it would be good to get some help. Although he had a master's degree from a well-recognized university, he thought that a Ph.D. program would provide a good structure for producing a book and help from academic advisors with more experience in writing text books and developing e-learning materials. Looking at his choices, Dr. Stark was impressed that Rushmore University employed successful business people as its professors and allowed students lots of flexibility in defining their study programs.

With his first course at Rushmore, he felt justified in his choice of school. An investigation of his opportunities to improve his business revealed that shifting his focus from consulting and training in a classroom to developing materials that others could use with others in a classroom or from the Web to teach themselves offered vastly more opportunity. By taking his knowledge and putting it into the more popular formats, the small world phenomenon

meant that he could hope to help millions of people yearly instead of hundreds.

That understanding re-directed his writing plans: He prepared by far the most comprehensive text book on how to apply scientific principles to seismic information to find oil and gas. Instead of providing sophisticated knowledge to just a few advanced people, his work is now be available and can be used by almost everyone who enters the field.

When oil and gas prices zoomed while he was writing this text book, another multiplier effect began to surface: The value of the information he was sharing soared.

As a result, Dr. Stark appreciated that he would earn a substantially greater income. What else could he do with his life?

Another educational goal was to improve as a person – spiritually, emotionally, and in relationships. With his new skill in creating improved learning materials, Dr. Stark realized that he could also focus on the needs of poor youngsters in underdeveloped countries for whom few educational materials are available. In the future, more and more of these youngsters will have free access to low-cost Web-connected computers from which they will be able to download free materials to learn important subjects.

With the profits from his text book and Web-based learning programs for oil and gas exploration, Dr. Stark saw that he could become a philanthropist who could provide helpful technical training where it is least available. Once again, the principle of six degrees of separation was shown to be an opportunity in his thinking.

Dr. Stark was so excited by the potential of these ideas that he completed his course studies and dissertation very rapidly . . . devoting almost two thousand hours during evenings and weekends over two years. An unexpected benefit of studying at Rushmore came in the form of free editing for his dissertation, a service that sped the process of turning the dissertation into a text book.

Due to the high quality of his work (based on decades of highly successful experience as both a geophysicist and as a trainer), Dr. Stark was soon able to gain a publisher for his breakthrough text. He was helped, in part, by the

experience of his advisor who is a well-known author of business books. As an example of this collaboration, his advisor assisted Dr. Stark to become a co-author in a book of essays about self-improvement written by world-famous people like Jack Canfield, co-founder of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series of books, and Dr. John Gray, author of best-selling books like *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*.

Are you excited about what he accomplished? Well, so was he. No sooner did he graduate then Dr. Stark decided to work on a second Ph.D. degree at Rushmore to write a second text book that will emphasize scientific principles you need to apply to more difficult problems of finding hydrocarbons.

Dr. Stark gained other unexpected benefits from his online education. Here is what he had to say:

“Another characteristic of writing this book is that it made me a better scientist as well. It forced me to look at the material in a way that the uninitiated would look at the subject matter. This in turn forced me to look at the fundamental concepts more deeply and therefore forced me to have a better understanding of the whole. It also made me a better teacher as I was able to take a rather difficult science subject and describe it in such a manner that even the difficult parts became clear to the uninitiated.”

You probably aren't a world-class expert in a hot area like petroleum geophysics. What are the lessons for you? Here are a few points to consider:

1. Chances are your career doesn't take enough advantage of the increasing ability to contact more people at low cost.
2. You probably have expertise that would be very valuable to lots of people, but you haven't yet put that knowledge into a form which others can easily use.
3. Distance learning can allow you to shift your focus toward more productive directions on a part-time basis while you continue to live and work where you do now.

Are you ready to start taking advantage of the six degrees of opportunity?

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Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your effectiveness, visit

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